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ABSTRACT

The college instructor preparing students for a career in high school teaching should incorporate into his or her course a unit on linguistic diversity. It is part of the instructor's responsibility to provide some training that prepares teachers for the wide diversity of dialects they will encounter in teaching students from places like the Philippines, Mexico, Haiti, Vietnam, Eastern Europe, and China. At least three features of language might be incorporated into a writing course (such as the one now being given at Gonzaga University) designed for pre-service high school teachers from a variety of disciplines. First, instructors might focus on how language changes. Few students have heard the differences in the sounds of the English language throughout history; excerpts from Robin McNeil's "The Story of English" provide illuminating examples. Second, instructors might explain that language is by nature varied; that is, there are standard and nonstandard varieties of language. Third, instructors might focus on grammar and usage, with the aim of encouraging linguistic tolerance. Students should understand the difference between grammar and usage, the latter being in Erika Lindemann's terms, "Linguistic etiquette...socially sanctioned styles of language appropriate to given situations and audiences." Many students furthermore are unaware that the notion of standard usage is a relatively recent phenomenon, having developed only in the 18th century. The documentary "American Tongues" shows the various attitudes toward the different American dialects and accents and is effective in this course. (TB)

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Language Diversity in a Complex Classroom: Teaching Teachers Linguistic Tolerance

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A survey of our own CCCC Bibliography of Composition and Rhetoric reveals that the profession recognizes its responsibility to educate prospective teachers about such issues as the use of technology in the classroom, methods of teaching reading and writing, preparing students for the paper load, designing writing courses, and authority and gender in the classroom. It is also our responsibility to provide some training that prepares teachers for the language diversity they will most likely encounter in their classrooms.

One reason is that our own organization urges us to do so in the resolution on language adopted by members of the CCCC in 1974. "Students' Right to Their Own Language" reads: "We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language--the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. . . . We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language." Two other important factors cause us to shoulder this responsibility: changing demographics, and students' lack of preparation. In the 21st century, journalists tell us--only a decade away--racial and ethnic groups in the

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United States will outnumber whites for the first time. Already, with immigrants into the country from places like the Philippines, Mexico, Haiti, Vietnam, Eastern Europe, and China, an increasingly wide range of dialects and languages are being spoken and written in the United States, and many citizens want to maintain home languages. Spokane, Washington, where I teach, has increased its population by the 4,000 to 5,000 Russian and Ukrainian refugees and the 2,500 to 3,000 Vietnamese refugees who have moved there in the past four years. At present, teachers in the city's public schools encounter 18 dialects of English among their students.

As for the second reason why we need to "teach teachers linguistic tolerance," we need only ask the question "What, in their formal educational background, has prepared them? At Gonzaga University I teach a course called "The Teaching of Composition" with two goals in mind: (1) to show future teachers in a variety of disciplines how to incorporate a significant writing component in the courses they will teach, and (2) to help them improve their own writing skills. The students in my "Teaching Composition" class are very likely typical of undergraduate populations in teacher education courses in terms of both their aptitudes and attitudes with respect to language. Unlike some teacher education courses in which our audience is only undergraduate English majors or English graduate students, my students are majoring in a variety of fields of study: this semester, I have majors in

the fields of English, Spanish, Religion, Sociology, History, Physical Education, and Mathematics. They are juniors and seniors taking this course, education courses, and other courses in their majors in order to receive teacher certification in the state of Washington. Their aptitudes with respect to language range from weak to strong. Some are good writers and communicators, some merely competent, and quite a few are weak. Some claim never to have had the formal grammar instruction we assume college students to have had, let alone having developed any awareness that this instruction prepared them to write a particular dialect of English--so-called "Standard Written English," or Edited American English--and let alone possessing an awareness of linguistics. As for their attitudes toward language issues, some students are downright irritated that they are required to take another course having to do with writing, thinking that they "had done with that sort of thing" after freshman composition. Indifference to language issues is common among these future teachers; most of them lack awareness that such issues could affect them daily in their classrooms, both in terms of their personal interactions with students and their evaluations of students' written work, whatever discipline they plan to teach in. Only a handful of individual students who have themselves experienced discrimination because of dialectal differences are sensitive to language issues.

To be prepared to deal with the multilingual classrooms they are likely to encounter, these prospective teachers need to be made aware of some principles of historical linguistics and social linguistics. "Students' Right to Their Own Language" lists several points about language with which teachers must be familiar. In the three-four weeks that I can devote to language issues in the Teaching Composition course, I expose students to at least these three features of language:

(1) that it by nature changes;

(2) that it is by nature varied--that is, that there are standard and non-standard varieties of language;

(3) and that the question of <u>appropriateness</u> is separate from the question of <u>correctness</u>.

In short, I am trying to give students <u>information</u> about language in order to persuade them to adopt an open-minded <u>attitude</u> toward it.

Those are appropriate goals for an entire course. How then, can I teach students about responsible uses of language in three or four weeks? What I would like to do here is to offer specific teacher training strategies for increasing potential teachers' awareness of the legitimacy of language diversity in the classroom.

First, we focus on linguistic change so as to impress upon students that the English language is a living rather than a static thing that has been enriched because it has absorbed changes throughout its history.

Second, we discuss grammar and usage, with the aim of encouraging linguistic tolerance.

Third, we discuss their responses to language diversity as represented in a documentary on American dialects which puts their tolerance and understanding of language diversity to a test.

First, we focus on linguistic change. Through a discussion of variations in languages and changes over time in the English language, I encourage students to view language not as something fixed, but changing in all parts of its grammar, ranging from the pronunciation of individual sounds to the rules for sentence formation.

Few of my students have heard the differences in the sounds of the English language throughout its history. For this, I play excerpts from Robin McNeil's The Story of English videotapes (Parts 1 and 2) that present modern-day scholars speaking their approximations of Old English (Beowulf) and Early modern English (Shakespeare). They are actually interested in the transparencies I display showing examples of consonant change and the effects of the Great Vowel shift, especially when it helps them understand their present-day spelling problems. I also pass around pictures of texts written in Old, Middle, and Early Modern English so that they can observe changes in orthography.

Unless the students have studied Latin, which few of them have, our discussion of morphological change is their first exposure to the relationship between case endings and

word order. Again, there's a brief segment of The Story of English videotape that illustrates the difference between Old English as a language that relied primarily on case endings for meaning and later English with its reliance on word order.

To my surprise, students show real interest in the many processes by which the English language adds words to its lexicon once it is pointed out to them that the words they use were created this way (for example "shopaholic" using derivation, or "urinalysis" using blending).

My goal in this "Philology in a Nutshell" is to make students see that language reflects its speakers and their histories, so that as citizens and teachers they are better prepared to make judgments about such issues as borrowings which may enter the language from the dialects their students will speak.

Second, we discuss grammar and usage, with the aim of encouraging linguistic tolerance. My first assignment on this subject is to have students write their responses to my reading this statement (making full use of my own Southern accent): "My husband and me, we don't like that store, so we don't go there no more. Me and him don't like it." Reading their responses leads the students into one of our liveliest discussions--they are surprised at their gut reactions and the assumptions that they make about our hypothetical speaker. The accent and non-standard usage lead them to assume things about her upbringing, morality, sexuality,

literacy, and intelligence. When students read some of their responses, they learn from each other, then, that based on speakers' or writers' dialect and usage, we make quick and important judgments about them--judgments that could profoundly affect teachers' responses to their students. I have them begin with this exercise because it gets to the heart of the issues of dialect, usage, and tolerance of difference.

I then introduce students to the linguistic issues that influenced their responses in order to help them analyze those responses. I distinguish between grammar and usage, the latter being, in Erika Lindemann's terms (in Rhetoric for Writing Teachers) "Linguistic etiquette, . . . socially sanctioned styles of language appropriate to given situations and audiences." I follow this up with a handout explaining some examples of the kinds of advice usage guides (such as Fowler and Bernstein) give ("Use am I not instead of Aren't I."), and a discussion of what writing and social contexts in which they think they need to use this kind of language. This raises the issue of how we use usage to tell us whether people come from a "proper background," and how different usages vary in their degree of acceptability.

As part of the discussion of usage, I review the origins of grammars of English and the rise of standards of correct usage. Students are surprised to learn that present-day rules of grammar are as relatively recent as the 18th century, and that prescriptive grammar is but an alternative

--the one that happened to take root--to the descriptive variety. We are then prepared to talk about another language issue likely to affect them as teachers--purist attitudes toward language usage.

The second linguistic issue we discuss in order to help students understand their response to my "non-standard" reading is the idea of "standard" languages. I explain that "standard" languages gain prominence by their speakers' being a dominant linguistic group among other, related linguistic groups. We talk about varieties of English, primarily variations across geographical space--dialects--and variations in individual idiolects--registers. The points I stress are that dialects and other non-standard forms are not intrinsically good or bad, superior or inferior, and that appropriateness--matching language to the occasion and audience--is a key issue.

I hope that as a result of this brief overview of grammar and usage, students are better prepared to make a distinction between "correct" grammar and usage and "appropriate" language uses for given contexts.

Students may find it easier to appreciate linguistic diversity in theory than in actuality. So, the third major feature of my unit on language is to give them a taste of linguistic diversity by showing the documentary American Tongues, by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker. This videotape is really not so much about language varieties in the United States as it is about Americans' attitudes towards language

varieties. In the tape, we hear speakers in various dialects (from the Bronx, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, and Texas, for example) talk about such issues as the discrimination they have experienced, their ability to be bi-dialectal, how their identity is caught up in their dialect, and the pride they take in it. We also hear their visceral, sometimes funny, often shocking and painful reactions to Americans who speak differently from them. Not only is the videotape humorous, it raises important questions for discussion: How do my students react when they can't even understand a speaker? What are their assumptions about speakers of non-standard varieties of English?

What I think this unit on language does is to alert students to the complexities of language. They can, I hope, begin to see through this series of exercises and discussions that "appropriateness" is a better guide to language problems than an artificially absolute "correctness." What we need to do--and what I have summarized here is my attempt at this in my own course under very limited time constraints--is to provide instruction that will help shape our students' attitudes toward language. Language can be used to communicate, or it can stand as a barrier between races, regions, and classes. Treating language issues, even in a brief unit such as the one I have described--is for many potential teachers of English and other disciplines their first and only exposure to the history of our language and to diversity among speakers of American English. We need to

provide them some information so that they can first understand linguistic variations, then not only tolerate but appreciate diversity, not scorn it.

For some of my students, this brief instruction "takes." Students frequently write in their journals about how their own assumptions about speakers surprise them, and about how the information I've provided challenges some of their assumptions. There is even the occasional epiphany: One student wrote in her journal that she had learned from the unit that "language is personal and powerful."

Today, moreso than 20 years ago when the CCCC called for us to provide teachers with training "that will enable them to respect [linguistic] diversity," we need to help our students who will be teachers make such discoveries about language.

A Few Resources for "Teaching Teachers Linguistic Tolerance"
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